

Dance, physical activities, and young people: A Taiwanese perspective

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Abstract

The Cloud Gate Dance School in Taiwan, as part of a review of the worth of its programs, has been conducting an investigation since 2012 into its impact on young participants' lives away from the dance studio. The study is a wide-ranging and open-ended consideration of the impacts of participation in dance and movement. It set out with no explicit research questions and no hypothesis to prove.

Youngsters aged 12-18 taking part in the school's programs were asked in questionnaires and interviews about their relationship with dance, focusing on their level of participation in other physical activities and reasons for involvement (or not), and the impact they believe that relationship has on their orientation toward the world, and attitudes toward academic subjects, life, self, and others. The study is particularly interested in understanding the effects of the dance experience from their perspective. As such, their first-hand views are paramount.

Analysis (still in process) so far indicates agreement with the existing research and huge volume of anecdotal evidence regarding the benefits of participation in dance for physiological health, psychological well-being, and other areas of education. It is already apparent that participation in dance plays a major role in the construction of young people's personal identity and sense of self.

Keywords: Cloud Gate Dance School, Taiwanese youth, body image, academic subjects, personal attributes

The Cloud Gate Dance School has 21 branches throughout Taiwan. Around 10,000 people of all ages take its classes each week, although most are children. The school's aims have always gone way beyond merely teaching people to dance. In fact, dance training is almost the least of its concerns. Life Pulse is the most popular of the school's courses. Although most classes are for children, the curriculum provides for participants aged 3 to 60-plus. With its focus on creative movement, the joy of taking part in a physical activity with others, learning about overseas cultures, and personal expression, Life Pulse brings together life experiences, art, and movement through multiple teaching and learning styles. Other courses include pre-professional, which is more traditional and technique-oriented, although taught in an often non-traditional way, and martial arts.

The Cloud Gate School cannot judge the value of its programs through examination results or dance grades. There are not any. But like all good schools, it does want to ensure it is achieving its aims, so it has to review the worth of its programs in other ways.

Since 2012, the school has been researching the impact of its Life Pulse classes and how participation affected the participants' self-identity and other aspects of their lives including body image, opinions about their academic skills, and personal and social skills including critical and creative thinking. The data gathered would then help the school improve the curriculum, and form the basis for further long-term research. Young people who do not attend the Cloud Gate School were also included so as to provide comparison groups. Study findings were released publically by the school in the report, *12-18 years old: Any difference between exercising and no exercising?* (Cloud Gate Dance School, 2015).

Naturally, the school hoped that the research outcomes would show that its aims were being met and that participation in courses was having a positive impact on the young people's lives, but to avoid accusations of bias, the school engaged the services of the respected Global Views Survey Research Center (now known as the Socio-Economic Research Survey Center) to carry out the study. The center is an independent Taiwanese research body that focuses on issues associated with society, the economy, education, and culture.

The study does not set out to prove a set of hypotheses or facts. It is simply a wide-ranging and open-ended consideration of the impacts and effects of being part of the dance experience as seen from the participants' perspective. As such, and although data was also collected via observation and teacher comments, 657 youngsters aged 12-18 taking part in the

school's programs, plus 1,576 non-Cloud Gate School students of similar age, were asked in questionnaires and interviews about their relationship with dance and other movement activities.

The questions fell into three broad groups dealing with:

- The young people's level of participation in physical activities and the reasons for involvement (or not).
- Their perceptions about their bodies (body image).
- Their attitudes toward academic subjects, life, self, and others.

In broad terms, analysis of the data collected to date indicates that the Cloud Gate School students — those young people in the study participating in dance — have excellent social skills, a more positive outlook on life, and greater self-confidence in expressing themselves than the rest of the survey population. With regard to academic learning, the survey results indicate that those involved in dance are both more interested and more confident in their abilities. The analysis also suggests that those young people participating in physical activities other than dance (essentially sports) are more open-minded and creative than those who do not.

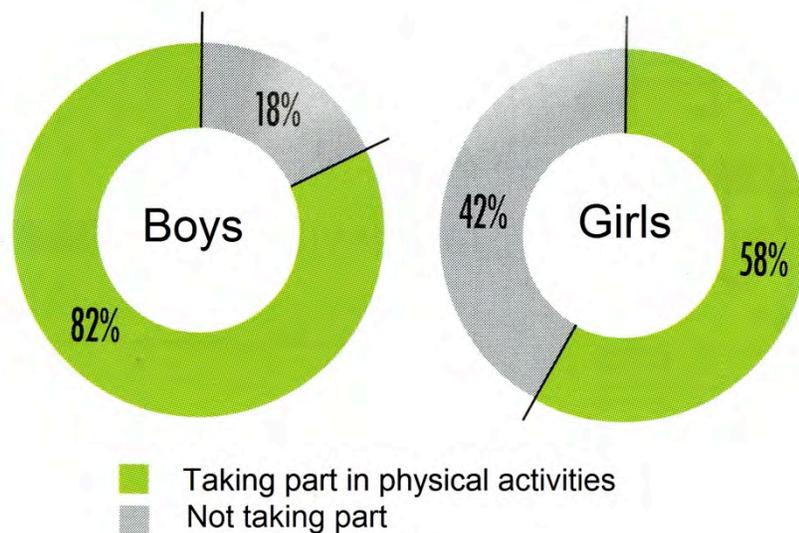


Figure 1: Percentage of young people in Taiwan taking part in physical activities.

The data shows that while 82% of boys participate in physical activities, only 58% of girls do so. This compares poorly to many other countries, especially for girls. The most recent government data in the UK, for example, suggests that around 90% of both boys and girls take part in physical activity, and around 80% do so outside of school (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2011).

The reasons for the overall difference, and the great disparity between participation levels in boys and girls, are unclear, but it should be remembered that Taiwan's cities are not awash with open spaces where one can pitch up and play. Furthermore, most people live in small apartments; the option to go and kick a ball around in the garden or yard simply is not there. The gender differences may be a reflection of social norms and expectations in parts of Taiwanese society generally, although again this is uncertain and requires further investigation.

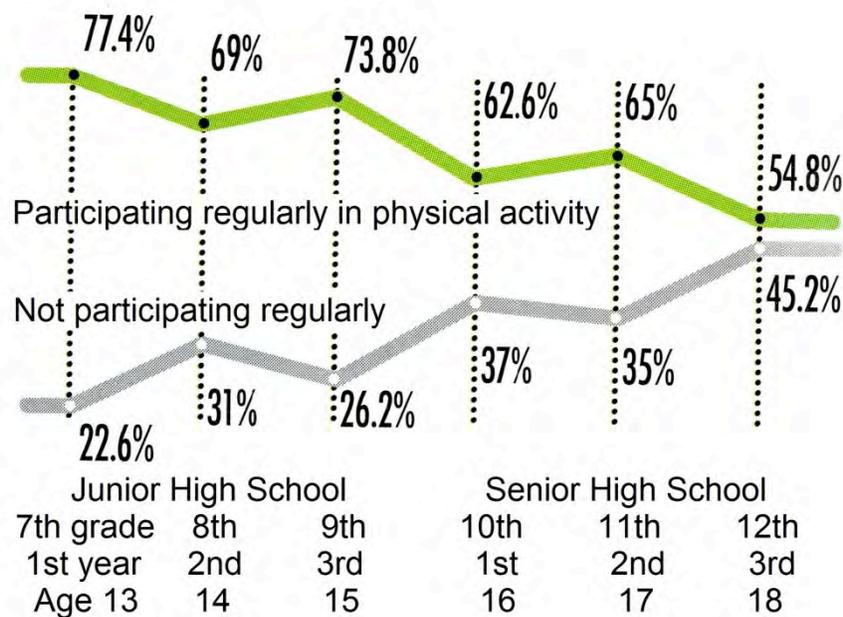


Figure 2: Participation in physical activity by school year

As Figure 2 shows, the percentage of children taking part in physical activities decreases quite significantly as they move up through the school system (the figures are for boys and girls combined). The fall is predictable given the emphasis placed by children, parents, and teachers on securing a place at a specific senior high school or university. It is impossible to underplay the importance of examination passes in that process. Parents and children commonly suspend

recreational activities after school in favor of more academic ones (children in Taiwan frequently attend additional after-school lessons in English and mathematics in particular) to ensure that exams are passed; and once an activity is given up, there is a strong chance it may not be returned to.

Given the health benefits of physical activity, the situation is more concerning than Figure 2 makes it appear. Although 54% of the young people in their final senior high school year participate in physical activities regularly, only 6% of those say they do so regularly.

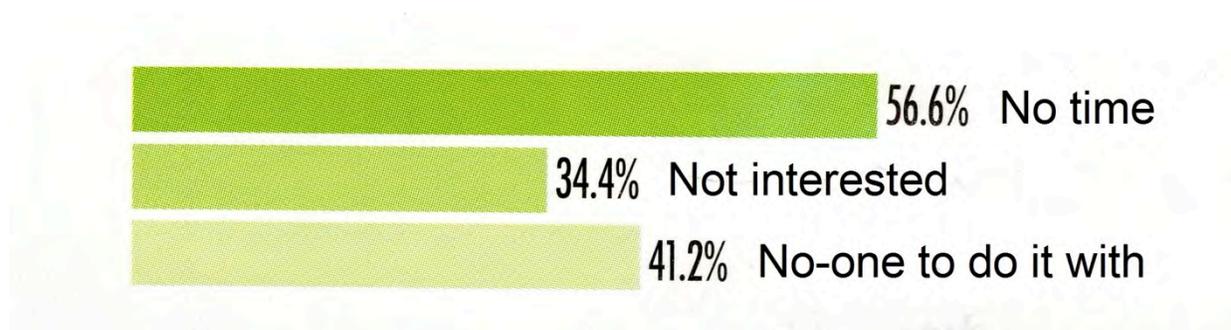


Figure 3: Why third-year senior high school students do not participate in physical activities

Although they were not specifically asked, school and examination pressures are likely the main reasons why, when asked why they did not take part in physical activity, the majority of the children replied that they had no time. Significantly, though, 41.2% said it was because they had no one to do it with (they could give more than one reason). Having a friend to go along with is seriously important. Many people only start or continue an activity because they are invited by a friend. Figures from Britain indicate that 52% of those taking part in physical activities do so with a friend and 62% with a brother, sister, or parent (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, 2011). Studies (for example, Harland, Kinder, & Hartley, 1995, pp. 183-188) also show that one of the biggest influences on going to a theatre to watch dance is having a “cultural mentor”; someone to go with.

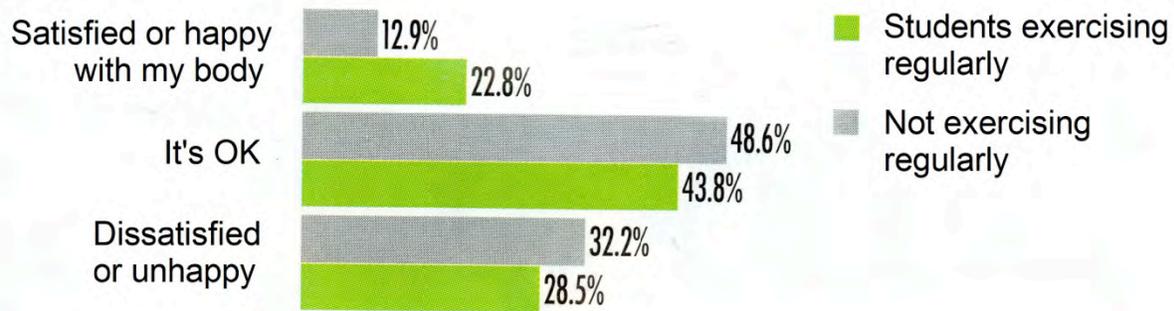


Figure 4: Overall perceptions of body image

Research evidence suggests that people of all ages are growing increasingly dissatisfied with their body image and physicality. Achtenberg (2006) suggests that mass media has a great influence on adolescent minds in particular, something that is only likely to increase with its ever-growing availability online. Drawing on a number of studies in the West, Croll (2005) notes that more than half of adolescent girls feel negatively about their body shape or size, with only 33% of them saying that they are at the “right weight for their body,” while 58% want to lose weight. She also finds that females are much more likely than males to think their current size is too large (66% vs. 21%).

The Cloud Gate School survey paints a somewhat different picture. While only 12.9% of the young people not taking regular exercise said they were “satisfied or happy” with their bodies compared to 22.8% of those who were taking part, only around 30% expressed dissatisfaction, there being no significant variation between the two groups. The reasons for the lower percentages in the Taiwanese survey are unclear. My own observations, admittedly unscientific, do, however, suggest that child obesity is rather less a problem than in the West, despite the increasing Westernization of diet and lifestyle.

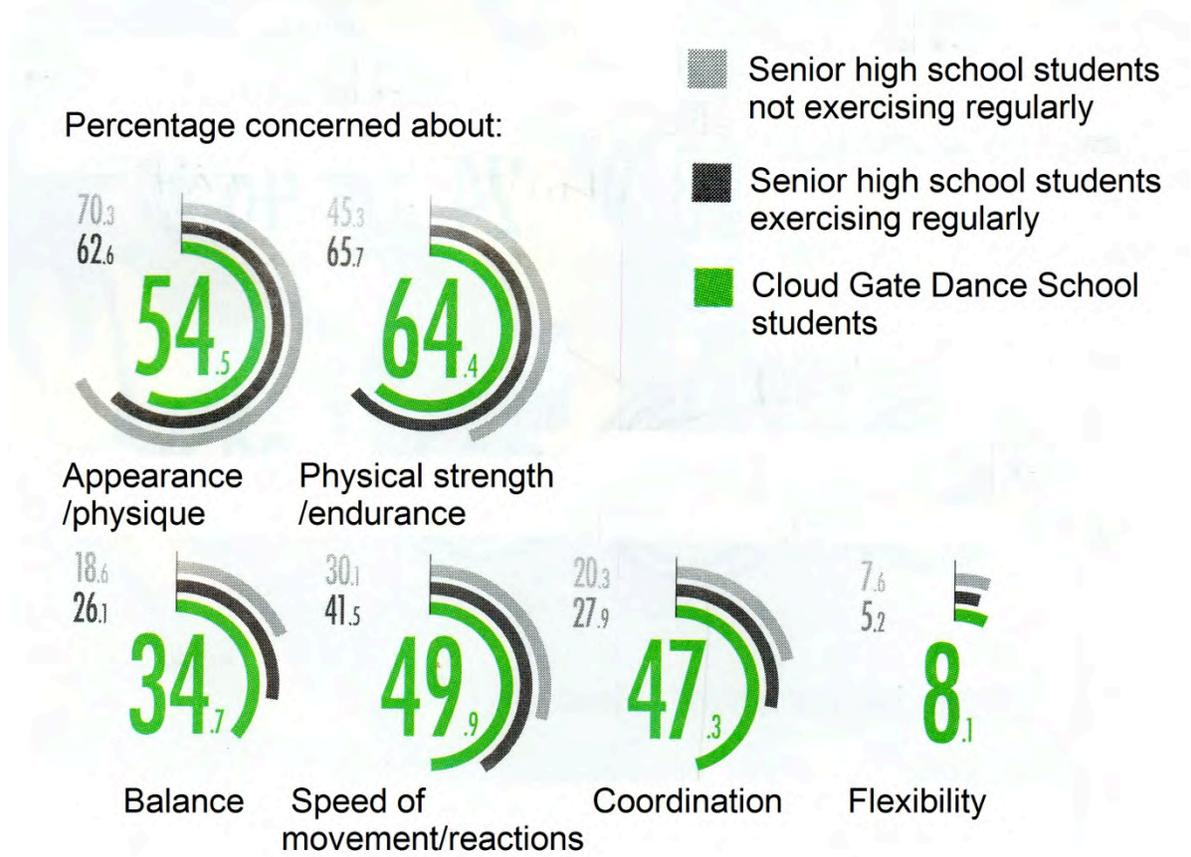


Figure 5: Students' detailed thoughts about their bodies

Looking deeper into the results, the data displayed in Figure 5 shows that those not participating in regular physical activity are significantly more likely to be concerned about body shape, and whether they looked or were overweight, than those who did participate. Students at the Cloud Gate School, or who took part in other physical activity, are more likely to be concerned about other aspects of physicality, including strength and endurance. However, although those who did not exercise are much less concerned about these aspects, within that group, there's a significant percentage that are. Given that they are concerned but are not engaging with dance, sport, or other forms of exercise suggests that those industries, or the leisure industry in general, are not meeting their needs in a way that appeals to them.

The researchers also asked about attitudes to academic learning, asking which subjects the students were interested in, and which they thought they were good at. The results, in Figures 7 and 8, are striking. With the sole exception of physical geography, the Cloud Gate School

students were more interested in every subject than the senior high school students who took part in other regular physical activity were, who in turn were more interested than those who did not exercise regularly. The differences in levels of interest are sometimes quite significant. Interestingly, given the emphasis placed on traditional academic studies by most Taiwanese parents (Chou & Ho, 2007), the subjects that most interested students in all three groups were music, art, and physical education.

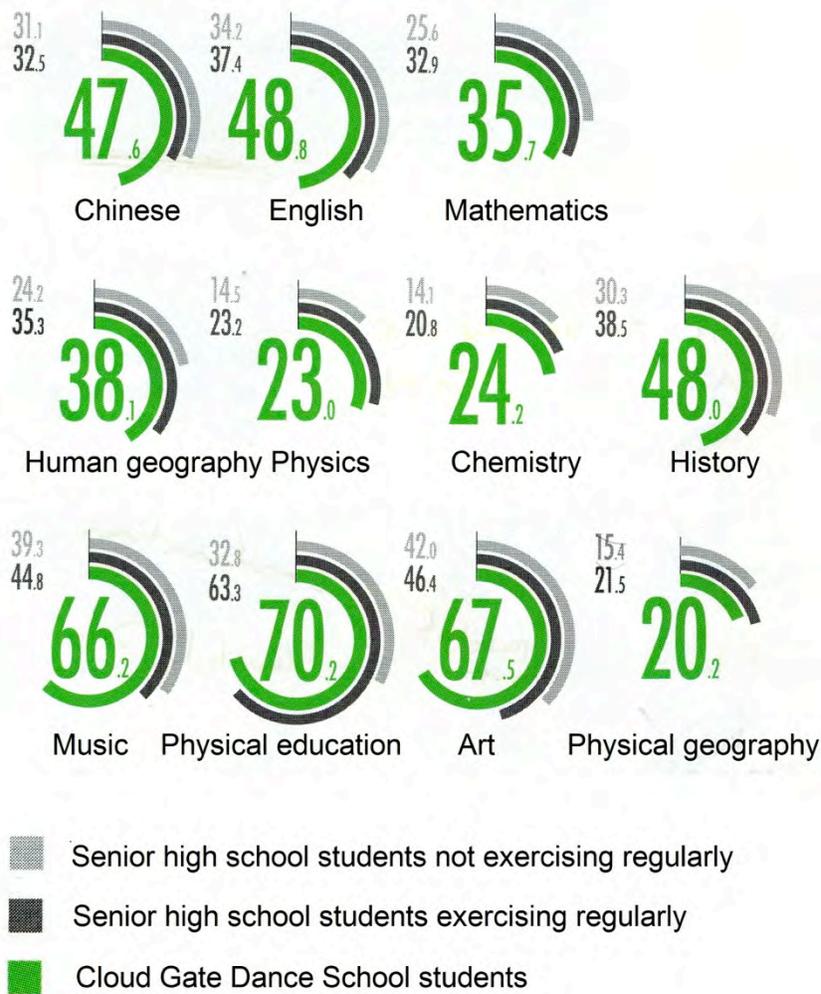


Figure 6: Percentage of students interested in other school subjects

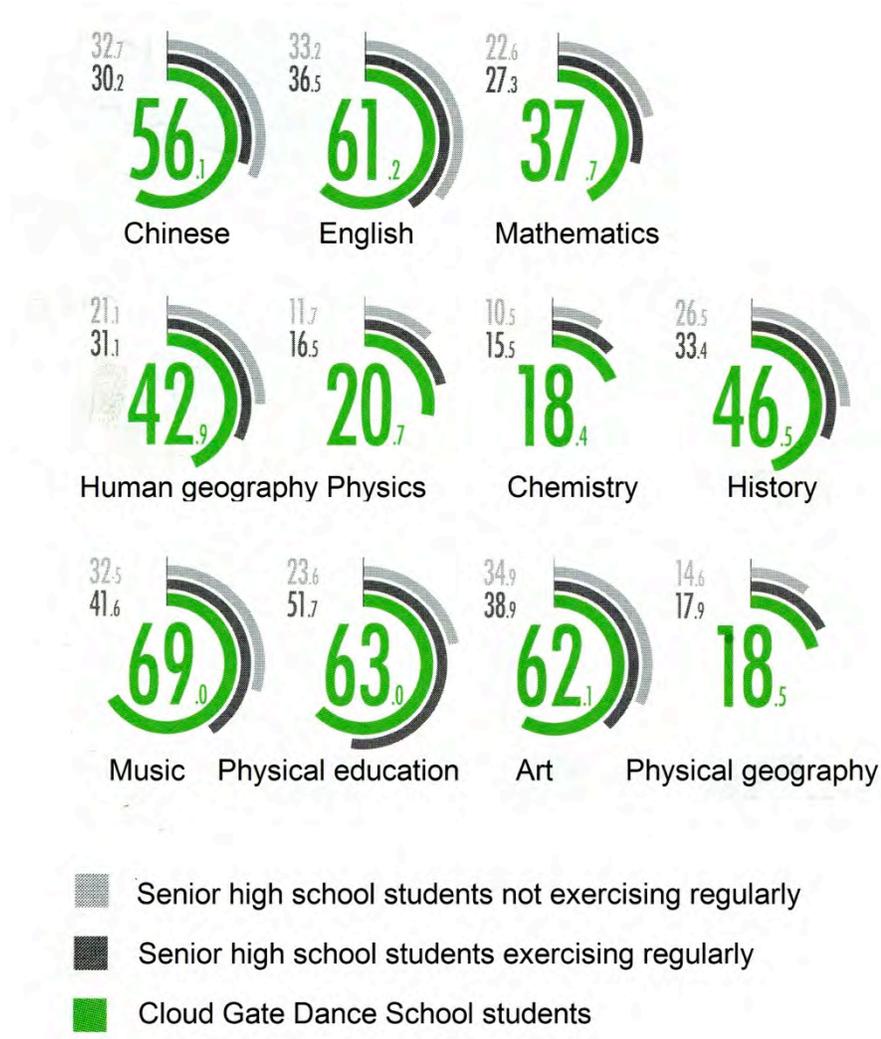


Figure 7: Percentage of students that perceive themselves to be good at other school subjects

The Cloud Gate Dance School study shows that a greater percentage of Cloud Gate students were more interested and perceived themselves to be good at academic subjects than other students. They felt more confident in their academic learning. Their academic self-esteem was higher in every subject area. As such, the study appears to back up the findings of other studies, including Quin, Redding, and Frazer (2007) for Laban/Hampshire Dance, and Urmston (2012) for East Youth Dance, both in the UK. As an aside, it is also worth noting that the non-Cloud Gate students who take part in regular exercise — essentially sport — are generally more interested in academic subjects than those who do, and sometimes significantly so.

There is also an extensive body of data, especially from the United States, that indicates students who participate in the arts achieve higher grades in academic subjects, and especially

standardized mathematics tests, than those who do not (for example, Ruppert, 2006; Ewing, 2010). It is a relationship that appears to be blind to socio-economic differences existing across society as a whole.

However, all is not as clear as it seems. Sir Kevan Collins in his foreword to See and Kokotsaki's review (2015) of the impact of arts education on both the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of school-age children in the UK notes that understanding how the skills developed through arts activities can be transferred to other areas of learning is far from straightforward, and while it is undoubtedly true that the arts introduces fun into lessons and thus leads to students experiencing greater enjoyment, it is much less clear to see if or how that enjoyment necessarily results in better learning (See & Kokotsaki, 2015, p. 1). See and Kokotsaki also note that biased reporting in studies "is not uncommon" (p. 19).

As Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin (2013) quite correctly state in a major report for the OECD, what studies almost invariably show is a correlation between aspects of academic life and arts education. The Cloud Gate Study is no different. Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin are very clear that while participation in the arts may lead to greater enjoyment of other subjects (as the Cloud Gate study suggests), claims that it leads to higher academic achievement in particular are best optimistic and are not well grounded in reliable evidence. They note that what almost all fail to show is a direct link between two facts or points of view, or a direction of cause. Near-identical conclusions were drawn in a major study in the UK by John Harland and others for the National Foundation for Education Research (Harland et al., 2000). Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin do note, however, that, of all the arts, evidence for positive benefit from dance (especially creative dance) and drama appears the most promising.

There are a number of plausible other explanations for the apparent links between participation in dance and greater enjoyment and achievement in academic subjects that cannot be ruled out:

- Students who excel academically and who study the arts may come from families who value both academics and the arts (this is particularly likely to be true where extra-curricular arts lessons are paid for and take place at specialist private institutions);
- They may be more likely to attend schools that stress both; and

- It depends on the school and parents, but good scores or educational ability can affect whether students receive an arts education.

As always with such studies, the problem is the lack of a satisfactory control group, something that is likely near-impossible to achieve, at least to a degree that would satisfy the statistical scientists.



Figure 8: Final charts

The final charts (Figure 8) cover a range of topics concerned with learning and social skills, and creativity. The data suggests that the students at the Cloud Gate School are more optimistic and have greater self-esteem and self-confidence, and see themselves as having better social skills than others do; and again, others taking part in other regular exercise have all those things more than those who do not. However, although it is very tempting to read cause and effect into these charts, the same cautions apply as previously noted.

Among the stand-out charts is the bottom center, which indicates that Cloud Gate students feel especially able to extend ideas from one area of learning to another. This feeling was also voiced, unprompted, during personal conversations I had with late teenage students at the school. The bottom right chart indicates that Cloud Gate students are significantly more likely to have excellent flexible thinking skills and be willing to try new things. Not being afraid to experiment in thought and action is an important aspect of the creative process.

Although they feel it is statistically weak, Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin (2013) do note that there is some evidence linking enhanced creativity with theatre and dance education, but not all kinds of dance education. Stronger backing for the link comes from a study by Verghese et. al (2003). Although primarily a study of dementia, they discovered that taking part in dance regularly had a significant beneficial effect on mental acuity at all ages. As Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin concur, those dance forms that have by far the greatest positive effect are those that require decision making, such as creative dance. But, as Winner and Vincent Lancrin (2013, p. 8) point out, “a class in any subject can teach creativity and imagination if well-taught; and an arts class can leave creativity and imagination untouched if poorly taught.” That’s true even in dance, where syllabus work in particular can put a big block on creativity if taught in a certain way.

One needs to be careful, though. Do the Cloud Gate students express the views about themselves they do because of their participation in dance? This part of the survey population is self-selecting. I consider it is quite likely that the Cloud Gate School is likely to attract children from families where parents are more open-minded anyway, and family background is important in developing a child’s view of themselves and the world.

Researchers also need to be aware that some subjects in research will give the answers they think the researcher wants to hear, at least to some extent. It is a well-known and recognized issue with all questionnaires, opinion polls, and surveys.

It must also be remembered that while the outcomes to date of the Cloud Gate Dance School study do support findings from studies elsewhere, there are dangers of drawing global conclusions. Taiwan is not the U.S. or the UK or Europe or anywhere else. Society is different; daily life is different.

Despite those notes of caution, my experience as a child, then dancer, teacher, and educator tells me that participation in dance does affect the aspects of life covered by the study, and that participation in classes such as in Life Pulse affects them more than most. The results do tell us something about physical exercise generally, and dance in particular. We just need to remember that other things may well be contributing to it, too. The question, as always, is how much.

The Cloud Gate study is hugely important, not least because very little in-depth research into the effects of dance education on academic, personal, and social skills and attributes has been done in Taiwan (or elsewhere in East Asia) where the potential benefits of dance and arts education in the wider sense are only now coming to be recognized. By engaging in such research, the Cloud Gate School is playing a valuable and essential role in highlighting the value of dance in wider life. The study can only help advance dance's claims. The work continues.

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